PLANNING AND CONSERVATION LEAGUE

The Delta Catastrophe is Already Here, And What We Can Do About It

Testimony of
Jonas Minton,
Water Policy Advisor
Planning and Conservation League[1]

I am Jonas Minton, Water Policy Advisor for the Planning and Conservation League. My comments today are also built upon my 30 years of experience in the water industry including serving as a water agency manager, executive director of a regional water forum and, from 2000 to 2004, Deputy Director of the California Department of Water Resources. I have done a lot bricks and mortar projects in my career.

Today I will quickly go through five key points you need to know as you think about the Delta.

The first is that **the Delta is already in a catastrophe**. This Delta is the largest estuary on the west coast of not just the United States but the entire Western Hemisphere. And its ecosystem is collapsing. As scientists reported to you in your earlier hearing, the pelagic fish are at record lows and some are teetering on the brink of extinction.

We would like to think of Mother Nature as a kindly, benevolent spirit. However the second thing we need to remember is that **there are real world consequences when we ignore physical laws**. Let's look at what happened in Louisiana. When they paved over the wetlands, they removed that natural buffer to storm surges. That helped let in the force that wiped out New Orleans.

[1] Presented to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Water and Power, April 6, 2006 by Jonas Minton jminton@pcl.org. For forty years PCL has been a leading environmental advocacy group in California. Over the past two decades PCL has sponsored and supported $16 billion in water and other resource bonds approved by California voters.

The Klamath River is an even closer analogy. In 2002 the decision was made to override the physical needs of the fish to allow large deliveries to agricultural customers. Now four years later the collapse of that fishery may very well shut down California's entire commercial salmon fishery and result in the loss of thousands of jobs. To compound the tragedy, it is now known that those levels of deliveries to water users in the Klamath Basin are not sustainable.

Just as in the Klamath Basin, attempting to ignore the ecosystem collapse in the Delta will actually force reductions in water deliveries.

The third point is that **effective catastrophe planning is essential but it cannot be done by faceless bureaucrats in their cubicles**. The Department of Water Resources is beginning to prepare a State contingency plan in conjunction with the public process for developing a Delta Vision. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California already has a plan in place to manage a 6 month interruption in supply from the Colorado River Aqueduct or the State Water Project. They are now extending their plan to cover a longer outage.

We are unaware if the federal agencies - the Bureau of Reclamation, the Corps of Engineers, FEMA and the fishery agencies - are cooperating on a federal contingency plan.

Congress should direct those agencies to use an open and transparent process to develop the federal plan for reversing the existing ecological catastrophe and reducing the risk of reductions in water supply reliability.

The fourth point is that the **peripheral canal is not the silver bullet answer to the problems in the Delta**. There is a natural inclination to think about a way to move water around, instead of through, the Delta. However the costs and environmental impacts of a peripheral canal are huge unknowns.

Even the engineering feasibility of a peripheral canal is questionable. The suggested intake location at Hood, California is only 19 feet above current sea level. Last month the journal *Science* published a study estimating that sea levels could rise by as much as 20 feet. Any rise close to that level would leave the peripheral canal as a multi billion dollar stranded asset.

All of this leads to the last, and most important point. California residents and our economy are dependent on a healthy ecosystem and reliable water supplies. **The best way to ensure reliable water supplies and to relieve the existing environmental catastrophe is to reduce diversions from the Delta and increase conservation, recycling, and groundwater cleanup.**

I strongly recommend that you carefully review the new information in the Update to the California State Water Plan just released by Governor Schwarzenegger's Department of Water Resources. Attached are key excerpts.

The State Water Plan shows that **even with an additional 12 million residents by the year 2030, under current conditions continued total water use will actually be slightly <u>less</u> than current water use**. And under a resources conserving scenario total use would be even less.

On top of all that the Governor's Updated State Water Plan also identifies an additional 5 million acre feet of urban water conservation, water recycling and groundwater cleanup potential. These include a lot of bricks and mortar projects.

In conclusion, the best way for dealing with highly likely risks to central and southern California water supplies and the current ecosystem catastrophe is to reduce Delta diversions and steer investments to the kinds of regional integrated projects that are much more reliable.